

# Here's to 100 years of smiles at Frederick's American Legion



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It began on Nov. 11, 2018. That was the first celebration, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. The second celebration came on March 15 of this year, which honored the 100 years since the first meeting of members of the American Expeditionary Force, who convened in Paris to establish an organization for veterans and called the group the American Legion. The third and final celebration? That was Friday.

Frederick's American Legion Post 11 celebrated its centennial last week, which meant that the organization has been around for 100 years here in the Key City. Some might shoot off fireworks to commemorate the milestone while others might throw the Party of All Parties, blaring music, drowning in a sea of alcoholic beverages and having so much fun, memories of those 100 years might be burned from attendees' minds after such rigorous festivities. But that just wasn't the style of the men and women who gathered Friday.

"Someone's gonna die before this is all over," senior honorary life member David Winpigler said jokingly as he read through the roll call of honorary life members.

The seemingly spontaneous line got an uproarious laugh from the crowd as Winpigler, along with Ralph Putman, continued to list off the members, the majority of whom are deceased. The jabs kept coming a few minutes later when Past Commander William Kennedy Jr., the program's de facto host, returned to the microphone.

"I just received a text from the veterans' home," he quipped. "An ambulance will be at the back to pick you up when this is all over." All jokes aside, the evening was a lesson in community and a reminder of the power in humility. Everyone there is proud of the 100-year milestone, and more than once, I was reminded that Frederick's Legion is the largest in Maryland, boasting 1,614 members.

Even so, the levity of the program wasn't lost on anybody. As numerous roll calls took place, the sound of a bell rang through the hall, denoting a member who had died. It was an audible reminder of how lucky those

in attendance were to just be there, and that appreciation wasn't lost on anybody.

"A lot of us had to come from a convention in Ocean City just to get here in time," Keith Clevenger, who served as the organization's commander throughout its 100th year, told me before the program began. "But we're glad everybody could make it." As they should be. Social clubs in America provide this weird, yesteryear fraternity that is often overlooked and under-appreciated by the younger set. It's somewhat sad to see that brand of establishment struggle with membership as their deceased patrons aren't always replaced by a still-developing subset of people whose age number is decidedly lower than the majority of the people currently patronizing said places. And it's especially sad to see that happening to the American Legion, a place that distinctly honors this country's military veterans.

Granted, you would never be able to tell that there might be a worry or two regarding the future of the Legion at Friday's event. As the 229th Army Band Old Line Quintet blasted through horn-centric versions of tunes that have been American staples for centuries, the vibe felt more like a class reunion than it did an opportunity to say one last goodbye.

Which, of course, added a particularly poignant layer of inspiration to the proceedings. Everybody treated everybody else like family, including me, a grumpy reporter from the local newspaper who had no previous affiliation with the club. It didn't matter, though, as countless members came to shake my hand, offer conversation or even allow me to view some very old — and very cool — photos.

That said, I couldn't help but think of something Keith told me as our conversation wound down before the event kicked off.

"We just need some younger veterans to come by and become members," he noted. "That's the only way we'll be able to continue into the next century."

Yet while that might have sounded a bit dour, I was struck when I looked up from my notepad to see that he was still smiling — and it was a smile that suggested 100 more years might not be as daunting as it sounds